Areas of Discrimination and Marginalisation in School and Preschool Education in Poland

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Chapter 3
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Introduction

The education system is one of the pillars of society. This pertains primarily to the agentive function that schooling plays not only in the secondary socialisation of individuals but also in the cultural transmission of dominant/dominated identities and hegemonic ideas as well as in the structural reproduction of positions, statuses and hierarchies. Adopting such perspective, we need to probe into the notions of the "normal," "natural," and "familiar" and scrutinise agendas behind them: how they are formed and perpetuated, how they function, what social and political ramifications they have, and whose interests they serve. In modern societies, such notions are central to the social ordering projects (such as a nation-state, an economic system or an institutional political universe), which produce and utilise various categories of "strangers" (Bauman 1991, 1997). Whether intentional or not, whether intended results of officially designed teaching contents or manifestations of informal action or "hidden curriculum" offshoots, discriminatory practices and structural marginalisation mechanisms constitute a significant dimension of the education system bound up with broader social, economic, political and cultural contexts and particular ideologies, power relations and conflicts. However, if the reproductive-oppressive apparatus is indisputably in place, the other facet of the modern condition – a desire for change and emancipatory struggles – is equally indelible (Rudnicki, Starnawski, Nowak-Dziemianowicz 2012).

In this article, we look into selected aspects of the school system's complicity in order-making processes at the service of the socio-political system. Some of the major contradictions inherent in the post-transition

democratisation have already been critically analysed by sociologists of education and educational scholars in Poland. The analyses address predominantly class inequalities and the impact of the neoliberal shift in education (commodification and marketisation of education as a services sector, stratification and selection/segregation of students, etc.) (Kwieciński 2002; Mikiewicz 2005; Szkudlarek 2007; Męczkowska-Christiansen and Mikiewicz 2009; Potulicka and Rutkowiak 2010; Rudnicki 2012). The reproduction of gender inequalities through education is another well-researched problem (cf. e.g. Pankowska 2005 and Kopciewicz 2007). More practice-grounded reports produced by non-governmental organisations have covered other areas of discrimination and exclusion. We draw mainly on materials which, while often underestimated by the academia due to scarce theoretical underpinnings, have a significant research value in that they are grounded in the actual needs and experiences of groups suffering injustice or struggling for equitable democratic participation.

We discuss four areas of discrimination and marginalisation: religious dominance, suppression of non-heteronormative sexualities, racism and xenophobia, as well as gender inequality in the case of preschool education. Our rendering of the Polish education system is by no means complete or ultimate. Indeed, it would be difficult to compile exhaustive and accurate data or precise and fully reliable statistical information, simply because discrimination is a sensitive, embarrassing and highly contested issue: it has been largely neglected or trivialised by many teachers and educators, and far too often silenced by the discriminated themselves for fear of exacerbating their already awkward situation as minorities, the stigmatised, the "strange" or the "unfit." Moreover, there seems to be still a long way to go for educational actors and policy makers as a recent research report by Towarzystwo Edukacji Antydyskryminacyjnej (the Society for Anti-Discrimination Education) highlights that the current systemic arrangements in teacher education and primary and secondary school education provide teachers and students alike with little anti-discrimination competence (cf. Abramowicz 2011: 292–298).[1]

[1] The project titled *The Great Absent: On Anti-Discrimination Education in the System of Formal Education in Poland* focused on two main research questions: "1. How do

Religious visibility and invisibility

The Constitution of the Republic of Poland stipulates the separation of the state and churches. However, this fundamental principle is apparently invalid in the public education system, which seems to be premised on the assumption that all students are Catholics. As a result, atheists or non-Catholics become invisible and, therefore, marginalised and discriminated against in the school system.

The School Education Act is a good case in point. Its Preamble states: "Teaching and upbringing, respecting the Christian system of values, are based on universal ethical principles." A visual symbol of respect for the Christian – and, in practice, specifically Catholic – values are crucifixes placed centrally on classrooms' main walls and demarcating the boundaries of belonging to the school community. In 2009, two upper secondary school students from Wrocław, the capital of Lower Silesia, formally requested that the school principal remove religious symbols from the school premises. The principal refused, claiming that the Polish law allowed such symbols in school. The students' request met with hostility of a prominent Polish politician and MEP, who called the students "naughty snot-nosed brats" and ridiculed their action as "childish trouble." The students took him to court and, eventually, won the case. The crucifixes, however, remained in the classrooms (cf. Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka [The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights] 2010).

Another striking indication of the dominance of Catholicism in the Polish education system is the inclusion of the Catholic religious instruction in public schools' curricula. Financed from the state budget, religion

the formal system of teacher education and further professional training promote their competence to oppose discrimination and acquisition of knowledge on equality and diversity" and "2. To what extent issues of equality, diversity, human rights as well as topics of prejudice, discrimination, exclusion or violence are present in Polish schools – whether Polish pupils have opportunity to develop competencies related to anti-discrimination education" (Jonczy-Adamska 2011: 10). The research team analysed official documents and educational standards, textbooks for different subjects (Polish, history, civics, family life education), and the post-graduate courses furthering teachers' professional development.

lessons commence already in pre-school and continue throughout till the end of upper secondary school. Students who do not want to attend them have the right to be offered ethics lessons instead. In practice, however, very few schools provide those, and, as a result, students may be compelled to either attend the Catholic religion classes or loiter in the school library/a hallway and receive their final certificates with a dash instead of a grade in the religion/ethics row. This was the case of Mateusz Grzelak, who – despite having to change schools several times – was never given an opportunity to attend ethics classes. Beginning with the pre-school, he was repeatedly brutalised by his peers. His parents continued to appeal to school principals, the Minister of Education, the ombudsman and other authorities, all but to little avail. Eventually, they filed a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights and won the case (cf. Pudzianowska 2003; Podgórska 2010).

The presence of Catholicism in schools is yet far more emphatic than the religious instruction in classroom. With Catholicism ubiquitously permeating everyday school life, religious services have become a standard element of official school celebrations, and a few days before Easter are taken up by retreat instead of regular lessons. There have been reports of schoolchildren being requested to say grace before meals in public primary school canteens. The universal endorsement of Catholic beliefs is taken for granted, and the presumption is so entrenched that the presence in school of children and youth of another or none denomination is bracketed off as utterly unimaginable.

Suppression of non-heterosexuality

Another group that clearly does not fit into the educational mainstream in Poland are gays and lesbians. As research projects on the situation of LGBT people in schools regularly reveal, educational institutions refuse to acknowledge homosexuality as an issue, while homophobia is unquestionably rampant. According to the 2012 report by Kampania Przeciwko Homofobii (the Campaign Against Homophobia) (Świerszcz 2012; Świerszcz et al. 2012), based on a survey and focus group discussions with teachers

and students, the school staff frequently either ignore the existence of non-heterosexual students or downplay the importance of sexuality for students. The report cites teachers saying: "I don't think we have any students like that (i.e. lesbian or gay). If we did, I would certainly know about it" (Świerszcz 2012: 36) or "We don't exclude anyone, but we simply don't give them a chance to show themselves. We don't encourage anyone to manifest their difference" (ibid.: 38). Unaware that there are homosexual students in their school, teachers also tend to deny the existence of homophobia. As a result, they do not find it necessary to develop any preventive tools against homophobic incidents, while claiming at the same time that their schools have implemented anti-discrimination policies, which forbid any kind of violence. As one teacher said,

> I don't see any reason why homophobic verbal or physical violence should be separated from verbal or physical violence driven by other kinds of prejudice, e.g. disability or "difference" in a broad sense of the term. Making homosexuality conspicuous and dissociating it from other kinds of prejudice may be counterproductive and breed an excessive interest in, for instance, people with unspecified (sexual) orientation. (ibid.: 21)

If homophobia is conflated with any prejudice and incidents it causes are subsumed under the umbrella term of violence as such, teachers cannot but fail to fully comprehend the experience and needs of homosexual students and, consequently, to develop solutions that would respond to those needs (ibid.: 39).

Even if aware of discrimination and violence against gays and lesbians, teachers may belittle their importance: "I don't think that homosexuals are somehow particularly knocked around and mugged, and I don't feel I need to protect them" (ibid.: 39); "I find it reprehensible to give this issue wide publicity, because sadly LGBT is not an example to be followed" (ibid.: 2012: 40).

Such attitudes possibly contribute to young homosexual people's aversion to revealing their sexual orientation in school. 44.4 percent of the student sample in the Campaign Against Homophobia study admitted that only their closest friends/kin knew about their orientation, while merely

12.6 percent disclosed their sexual orientation to both their peers and their teachers. 13.8 percent of the respondents did not divulge it to anyone at school whatsoever (Świerszcz et al. 2012: 49–50). Moreover, the majority of the students (76.2 percent) reported that they had witnessed homophobic verbal abuse targeted mainly at boys, and one fourth of them said they had witnessed homophobic physical violence (ibid.: 59–64). Students claimed that while teachers would react to homophobic physical violence if they saw it, they would often turn a blind eye to homophobic verbal abuse or even side with the perpetrators: "One priest in my school is a homophobe, and he hurled abuse at homosexuals himself" (ibid.: 66). Furthermore, according to the students, teachers react to homophobic physical violence not because of its homophobic character, but because they oppose violence as such, which in a way works to perpetuate the invisibility of homophobia in school. As one student put it, "they (teachers) tell people off for fighting, but the reason goes unmentioned" (ibid.: 68).

Particularly alarming is that fact that teachers themselves articulate homophobic sentiments, for instance labelling homosexuality as a disease or a sin, and condone discrimination based on sexual orientation:

> If we happen to refer to homosexual people in class, teachers like to express their views on this issue, and they are mostly negative. […] I heard at school that homosexuality offends God and that it is very unhealthy if a boy with a boy or a girl with a girl...
>
> My history teacher calls homosexuality a disease, he sometimes insults LGBT people and calls them names. (ibid.: 85)

The Campaign Against Homophobia report exposes a striking divergence between teachers' and students' perceptions of school in the context of homosexuality. Teachers seem to harbour a rather idealised vision of school, either emphasising that it is a place with zero tolerance for violence, including homophobic violence, or denying the existence of homosexuality and, consequently, homophobia in school. Homosexual students, on the other hand, talk about a frequently traumatic experience of school to which they hardly belong:

> Homosexuals are nobody for heterosexuals. They can be despised, spat on, abused. They are like black slaves tormented by conquistadors. And it is also how they feel. […] Human beings, or at least those who consider themselves human, claim that they would not kill anyone, nor even hurt them sometimes. And yet, they constantly do. I am walking down the hall – "fagot," I am waking down another one – "fag." EVERY word kills me little by little. It damages my soul, engraving it with long cracks of fear, sadness and ever more tangible loneliness. But I try to be strong, even if I think I can't. But I have to... (ibid.: 92–93)

Ethnic-cultural prejudice and discrimination

Some growth of interest in "multicultural" (or "intercultural" as a more common Polish formulation has it) education has been observable in Poland in recent years. Commercial and academic publishers, as well as non-governmental organisations, have released a wealth of resources ranging from books on education studies and research reports to on-line materials for teachers, e.g. lesson plans. Moreover, the institutional-legal foundations for cultural equality have actually been laid: following the 2005 Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language[2], the Ministry of National Education introduced regulations concerning teaching minority languages in schools. Indeed, in contrast to the largely erased issues, such as non-heterosexual minorities, elderly people or history of women's emancipation, the subject of ethnic/"racial" or national diversity seems to occupy relatively more space in the official core curriculum or textbooks (cf. analyses in: Abramowicz 2011).

Official educational documents have proclaimed promotion of tolerance and "intercultural dialogue", teaching materials are supposed to include relevant modules, some teachers have espoused these views and

[2] The Act recognises 9 national and 4 ethnic minorities (the difference being that the former have their nation-state outside Poland, while the latter do not) and one regional language. For the text of the Act, see: http://www.usefoundation.org/view/479 (retrieved on 21 June 2013).

curiosity for cultural difference is growing in the young generation. However, despite all these developments, it would be far too optimistic to say that Polish schools are free from prejudice and discriminatory practices based on ethnicity or national identity. For instance, a report by the Society for Anti-Discrimination Education showed that in the analysed Polish language textbooks for primary and lower secondary schools (*gimnazjum*) the word *nation* denoted only "the Polish nation and its traditions, remembrance and national characteristics (...) pride in belonging to the Polish nation, and in some textbooks its usage had nationalistic overtones" (Pawlęga 2011: 127). As the report concluded, "the analysed textbooks provide pupils with insufficient competence in anti-discrimination education with regard to *race* and *ethnic background*. The few national groups that are mentioned (Africans, Jews) are presented only in contexts unrelated to the situation in Poland and to racist and anti-Semitic incidents that take place in our country" (ibid.: 129).

Also reports by the Stowarzyszenie Nigdy Więcej (Never Again Association), a major anti-racist organisation in Poland, provide evidence of discriminatory acts based on ethnic prejudice. Examples include negative experiences of children from the Chechen refugee families near Bialystok (Grell et al. 2009: 110) or anti-Semitism displayed to a teacher in Gdańsk by her colleagues in 2007 (Kornak 2009: 391). To celebrate the 2005 Independence Day in a Konin school, a history teacher engaged students in an "all-Polish looks contest," with "proper" hair- and eye-colour, complexion, face and skull shape as criteria for winning, clearly redolent of Nazi-type racism (Kornak 2009: 307). Anti-Arab prejudice was noted by the mainstream media, when a local official on a visit to a Będzin school physically assaulted a 14 year-old student of Polish-Egyptian background who interrupted an Israeli ambassador's speech saying "free Palestine" out loud. Witness to the event, one of the teachers blurted: "No wonder, he is a half-Pole and half-Arab" (Cichy 2009).

Perhaps the most glaring example of marginalisation and discrimination in the Polish schooling system is the predicament of the Roma. As early as in the 2002 report titled *The Limits of Solidarity*, the European Roma Rights Centre criticised racism in Polish schools and structural obstacles to education of Romani children:

> During the 1990s, the practice of segregating Romani students in so-called "Gypsy classes," or special classes for the developmentally retarded, has spread to many areas of Poland. Poorly equipped and staffed, with curricula that reflect racist stereotypes and prejudices, these classes offer substandard education to their students and in effect promote further marginalisation and exclusion for Romani children. Furthermore, some school administrators in Poland refuse to register Romani students in integrated schools, effectively denying the applicants their right to education (*The Limits of Solidarity* 2002: 10).

The report cites also "abuse against Romani students by school staff and non-Romani students," in which "instances, school authorities often fail to protect the victims of abuse or to punish those responsible for it" (ibid.). The ERRC report recommendations for the schooling system included: a comprehensive desegregation plan, development of pre-school programmes for Romani children to ensure equal start, development and implementation of adult education programmes, implementation of legal measures to prosecute school authorities responsible for mistreatment of the Roma, development of curriculum inclusive of the Romani language, culture and history instruction as well as making consciousness-raising on the Roma presence and contributions to Polish society part of non-Romani children education (ibid.: 12–13).

Figures show the depth of the problem with education for the Roma in Poland. In the National Censuses of 2002 and 2011, about 13,000 and 17,000 people, respectively, declared Romani nationality, and in 2002 more than 15,000 declared Romani as their mother tongue. However, the estimates by the Ministry of Interior as well as scholars and Romani activists propose even higher numbers ranging from 20,000 to 30,000 (Filipiak 2011: 31). In this largely urban (92 percent of Roma live in towns/cities) and young (with the mean age of 27.7, as compared to 37 years for Poland) population, only 10 percent make their livelihood from wage labour, while 90 percent from various welfare sources, and an indefinite, yet certainly substantial, proportion live on "underground economy." The high unemployment rates (over 90 percent) among the Roma are caused primarily by poor education. According to the 2002 National Census, only 2.7 percent of the Roma had secondary education, and only 0.1 percent had a univer-

sity degree (overall a dozen or so persons in Poland!), while 90 percent had only (some or completed) primary education, of whom a half had not finished primary school (ibid.: 32). Moreover, in the 2000/2001 school year, education superintendents in all 16 provinces nationwide estimated that "approximately 30 percent of school-aged Romani children in Poland did not meet their obligation to attend school. […] The efforts of authorities to combat such high levels of truancy have to date been wholly ineffective" (*The Limits of Solidarity* 2002: 163).

The state authorities noticed the problem quite early after the transition, although with much neglect. Consequently, special programmes aimed at advancing education of the Roma were launched as early as in 1992, including the formation of "Romani classes" based on the Ministry of National Education regulations and grassroots initiatives in different local schools throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Filipiak 2011: 37–38). Unsuccessful or partially successful attempts at empowering the Roma in and through education targeted, among others, language instruction (which failed due to the lack of Romani teachers). These efforts became more concrete and comprehensive after an upsurge of criticism from international bodies committed to anti-discrimination and human rights shortly before Poland's accession to the European Union (ibid.: 38–40). Two new developments were: *The Pilot Government Programme for Roma Community in 2001–2003* implemented in Małopolska[3], and *The Programme for*

[3] It was no accident that Małopolska (a region in southern Poland) was selected for the pilot project. It is a province with one of the largest Roma populations, comprising a significant proportion of Bergitka Roma (or Carpathian Roma), the poorest Roma ethnic subgroup. Some evidence of anti-Roma school racism and exclusion of Romani children comes from Tarnów, the province's important city. An 18-year-old woman told the ERRC about her peers' prejudice against her at school and discrimination by a teacher: "My biology teacher (...) said that she could not give me a better grade in biology. My result was between 4 and 5. I asked why, and she said that there was no way that a Gypsy could be better than other children" (*The Limits of Solidarity* 2002: 158). An activist of the Roma community in Tarnów said in the late 1990s that after he and his family had returned from a longer stay in Germany a few years back, schools would deny admission to his Romani children: "I turned to the director of one of the schools to solve the problem, but she told me that Roma don't need education. She said that Roma were criminals anyway and that it wouldn't make any sense to invest in our kids. She said something like 'These people don't have a right to exist'" (ibid.: 162–163).

Roma Community in Poland, which started in 2004 and is scheduled to end in 2013. Both schemes emphasised education. Despite a rather slow progress in Romani children's school achievement, their poor knowledge of Polish, a shortage of Romani teachers, and the practice of segregating Roma pupils into "special" schools for the developmentally retarded, the two programmes have had some positive, though admittedly modest, results. They included school equipment subsidies, provision of textbooks and insurance, summer camps and local day-rooms for Romani children, employment of Romani education assistants (i.e. trusted members of the Roma community who help children at school and facilitate school-parents contacts) and ancillary teachers in Romani education (professional teachers competent to work with Romani children as bicultural and foreign-language students, especially in early education). In the school year 2005/2006, there were 91 assistants and 119 ancillary teachers. In 2009, the number of assistants rose to about 100, and 100 Roma studied at universities (ibid.: 40–46). Many endorsed the integrative efforts manifested in abolishing "Romani classes", but the change did stir controversy and some Romani parents decided to take their children out of school (Wyborcza.pl 2008; Kulczycka 2008; Szpunar and Dańko 2008a, 2008b).

The aforementioned moderate educational developments have not translated, however, into an improvement of employment figures. An overall progress toward the Romani development and empowerment after the transition seems flawed on the side of the state authorities: "No comprehensive policy targeting this national group has been developed. Without any grounding in an in-depth social analysis, a betterment of 'Romani education' was assumed to be a remedy to this group's problems, such as low living standards and soaring unemployment. Changes in education have failed to produce expected results, but that has had no corrective effect on the state policies" (Filipiak 2011: 46).

Gender inequality: the case of preschool education

In 2012, Fundacja Równosci (The Foundation for Equality) carried out a research project to investigate the implementation of equality policies, with a special focus on gender, in preschools in Lower Silesia. Consisting

of a survey addressed to preschool teachers, scholars and administration workers, and of an open forum debate, the project has shown that gender equality policies are hardly present in preschool education. This does not come as a surprise. The national core curriculum for preschools lays down that one of preschool education objectives is for children to know by the time they complete preschool that all people have equal rights (*Podstawa programowa...*: 5). This general statement may or may not be translated into concrete educational practices related to preventing discrimination on any ground as the curriculum lacks any stipulations guaranteeing implementation of such practices. And, indeed, analyses of curricula developed on the basis of the national core curriculum reveal that "a gender equality policy does not surface [in those curricula] either on the level of premises and strategies or on the level of practical technicalities, such as proposed games, activities and tasks for children" (Dzierzgowska et al, no date a): 29). The survey results clearly corroborate this observation, as they report that preschool teachers tend to underestimate the role of preschool as a place where children learn about gender roles and gender-related inequality. As many as 84.5 percent of the teacher sample in the study attributed inequality to home upbringing, while only 31 percent to preschool education. At the same time, when asked to choose an adjective best characterising children at play, the teachers ascribed very different qualities to girls and boys. In their view, while playing, girls are first of all well-behaved and obedient (properties picked by 20 percent of the teachers). These qualities were almost never assigned to boys at play (2.5 percent). Boys are perceived primarily as loud (ca. 31 percent of the teachers; "loud" was chosen for girls by only 4 percent of the teachers) and hardly ever as sensitive, sensible or gentle (Gawlicz 2012: 39–40).

Other studies also indicate a limited gender awareness of preschool teachers. In her highly revealing analysis of preschool education from the symbolic violence perspective, Małgorzata Falkiewicz-Szult (2007a) demonstrates that teachers often arrange classrooms based on their stereotypical understanding of gender roles and interests. Classrooms are divided into boys- and girls spheres, each furnished with gender-specific toys. Falkiewicz-Szult quotes teachers saying that "everyone knows that girls play with dolls and boys with cars. I buy little DIY sets for boys and house-

hold sets or dolls for girls," telling girls not to play with cars and play with dolls instead, and explaining that boys don't cry and don't cook dinners (Falkiewicz-Szult 2007a: 130). They also claim that when buying board games, they choose ones "with more rules (for boys). Boys like such games […]; girls prefer simpler ones, so we try to get them those" (Falkiewicz-Szult 2007b: 357). Multiple analyses show also that early childhood education handbooks are highly gender-biased (cf. Chmura-Rutkowska 2003; Gawlicz 2002; Pankowska 2004). On the handbook pages, children play with gender-specific toys, engage in different, gender-specific activities and look very different: neat and tidy girls in pretty dresses and bows in their long hair, and boys in patched shorts, with band-aids on their knees and slingshots in their pockets (Gawlicz 2002: 21). Children also learn about gender roles from songs and poems they are taught in preschool that feature mothers as always busy cleaning, cooking and taking care of the children, and fathers as children's companions in explorations of the world (see Dzierzgowska et al. no date b): 16–18).

As these examples suggest, children in preschools may be exposed to rather stereotypical views on gender roles. This could result in part from inadequate teacher training. Since equality- and anti-discrimination education is not referred to in teacher training regulations (Chustecka 2011: 26), it is likely to appear only marginally in actual curricula and programmes. And indeed, as many as 93.4 percent of the teacher sample in the research project on the equality policy implementation reported that they had never participated in any training on gender equality. Even though the majority of them declared that combating gender stereotypes in preschool education was important and, moreover, considered preschool teachers well prepared for that challenge, in reality they may lack the necessary skills and competencies.

Conclusions

The list of areas of discrimination and marginalisation in Polish education could be extended. Ageism, inadequate disability awareness or silencing dissident voices of students involved in radical social movements,

are a daily reality of Polish school. Every act of discrimination should be viewed as a breach of democratic principles; and reproduction of common patterns of prejudice and prejudice-based action should be seen as leading to an institutional-discursive closure of the education system and preventing change. Commonly practised in schools, forced assimilation (i.e. suppressing of difference) and exclusion (i.e. maintaining difference in a stigmatising way) both reveal an evident disparity between democratic declarations of officials, educators and opinion leaders on one hand and authoritarian realities of school on the other. Authors of the Society for Anti-Discrimination Education report recommend a number of viable measures to reduce and eventually eliminate the problem: from promoting knowledge of discrimination mechanisms and stigmatised groups' experiences, to monitoring and abolishing of discrimination in education processes, to initiating systemic solutions such as revised teaching standards or accreditation requirements for the anti-discrimination educational offer. It seems, however, that all these necessary steps should be considered within broader structures of not only cultural reproduction but also current ideological production and reinforcement of prejudice and hate-based ideologies in aggressive nationalist politics apparently on the rise in recent years. Indeed, the social and economic crisis is rife with challenges and threats not very different from those of the 1920s and 1930s, when fascist populisms promised improvement of living standards for selected sectors of European populations at the cost of various "strangers" (cf. Starnawski 2012). Only when we fully realise that educational efforts are entangled in and interdependent with those broader economic and socio-political contexts shall we be able to make a step toward fulfilment of emancipatory promises of transition: democratisation, economic welfare and civic empowerment of society.